

NATO in the Balkans: Consequences and Perspectives

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Abstract: Despite the fact that the Balkan states, excluding Greece and Turkey, were not members of NATO during the Cold War period, this military alliance has maintained a high level of interest in the Balkan region. The Balkans represents a contact zone between Europe and the Middle East, and, in this context, it is seen as a bridge connecting a broad strategic line from the Baltic in the North to Anatolia in the South in this post-Cold War unipolar system. With a more aggressive approach and a number of initiatives, NATO has managed to create deep influence in the Balkans and become a key factor in regional security. Nevertheless, NATO is facing numerous challenges that threaten its position in the Balkans and create problems for the perspectives in the region. Some of those challenges were created by NATO's bad estimates and wrong approach in previous decades. First among those challenges is the issue of Kosovo. In light of the ongoing transformation of the structure of the world political system, this issue is taking on a totally new dimension.

This paper consists of five parts. After the introductory part, where the goals of the research are described, there is a second part that explains the reasons why NATO has a long-term interest in the Balkans and how that has manifested in NATO's role during the civil war in Yugoslavia. The third part is dedicated to NATO's expansion in the Balkans, and the fourth part is dedicated to deliberations on the consequences and perspectives of that process. The fifth part is concluding remarks,

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including predictions of future events after the escalation of the Ukraine crisis.

Keywords: NATO, Balkans, NATO's expansion, war in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Russia, China.

Introduction

In the past quarter of a century, NATO's actions in the Balkans have received the greatest attention from authors who considered that the integration of the Balkan states into NATO was useful. Thus, the impression was not only that there were no different views but also that the expansion of NATO to the Balkans was unquestionable and irreversible (Zagorcheva 2012, 7–31; Katchanovski 2011, 304–319; Polak & Hendrickson and Garrett 2009, 502–514; Morelli et al. 2009). At the same time, the leitmotif was constantly running through that it was primarily in the interest of the Balkan actors, who, by joining NATO, should become “exporters of security” and stop being “importers of security” (Đukanović and Dašić 2021, 325–333; Jano 2023, 50–69). Is this really so?

Relying on realist theories and using the comparative method, this paper problematizes the issue of NATO's actions in the Balkans and the perspectives that appear on the horizon after the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis. In this context, relevant literature from the fields of political science, history, strategic studies, and military sciences is used, as well as primary sources embodied in documents of international organisations and testimonies of individuals.

NATO: Interest in the Balkans and Actions During the Breakup of Yugoslavia

Willi Wimmer, a member of the German Bundestag with decades of experience (from 1976 to 2009) and vice president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (1994–2000), addressed a confidential letter on May 2, 2000, to Gerhard Schroeder, the Federal Chancellor. The public will be informed about the contents of this document only later, with some delay. The occasion for the address was Wimmer's attendance at a closed conference in Bratislava in April 2000, organised by the US State Department

and the American Enterprise Institute (Foreign Policy Institute of the Republican Party).

The main topic of the conference was NATO expansion and the Balkans. "The conference was attended by very high political representatives, as indicated by the presence of a large number of prime ministers, as well as ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of defence from that region. Among the many important points that were discussed, some of the topics deserve to be highlighted: 1) The organisers of the conference demanded that the international recognition of the independent state of Kosovo be carried out as quickly as possible among the allied countries; 2) The organisers stated that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is outside any legal order, and above all outside the Final Document from Helsinki; 3) The European legal order is an obstacle for the implementation of NATO's plans. In this sense, the American legal order is much more suitable for application in Europe as well; and 4) The war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was waged to correct the wrong decision of General Eisenhower during the Second World War. That is why, for strategic reasons, American soldiers must be stationed there and thus compensate for what was missed in 1945" (Wimmer 2015, 17). Also, the letter states some other conclusions of the conference: "7) During the current expansion of NATO, it would be appropriate to re-establish the territorial situation in the area between the Baltic Sea and Anatolia, as it existed at the time of the Roman Empire when it was at the peak of its power and occupied the largest territorial expanse; 8) Therefore, Poland must be surrounded from the north and south by democratic states as neighbours, and Romania and Bulgaria must provide a land connection with Turkey. Serbia (probably to ensure the uninterrupted military presence of the US) must be permanently excluded from European development; 9) North of Poland, complete control over St. Petersburg's approaches to the Baltic Sea should be achieved; and 10) In any process, the right of peoples to self-determination should be given priority over all other provisions or rules of international law" (Ibid.).

As expected, the publication of this document attracted the most attention in Serbia since point 1 discusses the "independence of Kosovo", which was "loaded" long before any status negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina began and before the full implementation of Resolution SB UN 1244 (1999) that regulates the status of Kosovo (essential autonomy within Serbia), but

also because of the announcement that “Serbia must be permanently excluded from European development” (UN SC 1999). However, it is even more interesting that the “independence of Kosovo” and all other proposed measures fit into a clearly defined strategic goal: the expansion of NATO to the Balkans in the context of projecting a new “territorial situation” from the Baltic Sea in the north to Anatolia in the south (Mitrović 2008, 9–14; Komarčević & Pejanović and Živojinović 2016, 431–444). The Balkans is apostrophized as a very important geographical area. That is why it is necessary to correct General Eisenhower’s mistake from 1945 and station military forces in the Balkan states. Maybe Eisenhower thought that the Balkans were less important or that control of the area could be maintained by other means without the deployment of military forces! The non-deployment of military forces influenced the constant appearance of suspicion among American strategists towards communist Yugoslavia. This remained evident even after the 1952 signing of the official agreement on the Balkan Pact between Belgrade, Turkey, and Greece. “There is a fear in the US that Yugoslavia may abuse its military aid and alliance with Greece and Turkey and contribute to the weakening of the Western defence system by playing the role of a Trojan horse and Soviet exponent” (Bogetić 2001, 190). If there were American military bases in Yugoslavia or if Yugoslavia became a member of NATO, trust would be greater; that is, American dominance in the Balkans would be more secure. This way, since there was no such thing, only Turkey and Greece became NATO member states in the Balkans.

“The Balkan Peninsula represents a contact zone between the Adriatic and the Black Sea waters in a narrower geographical sense (along the west-east axis), i.e., the Central European and Middle Eastern continental areas in a broader sense (along the northwest-southeast axis). Domination over the Balkans made sense in the context of limiting the maintenance or a long-term penetration of the Russian influence in the border area (which represents the first step in the process of ensuring its borders) at the Caucasus-Black Sea direction (newly created independent states Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Ukraine, as well as USSR allies at the time, Romania and Bulgaria) and for uninterrupted planning of activities in the Middle East” (Ponomareva and Proroković 2021, 120). The process of NATO expansion in the Balkans is shown in Table 1 (Table compiled according to Proroković 2018, 557–579).

Country	In NATO since	Geostrategic significance for NATO
Greece	1952	Securing a position in the Eastern Mediterranean; surveillance of communist states in the immediate vicinity (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania); control of Otranto; harmonisation of foreign and security policy with Turkey in order to prevent the outbreak of a large-scale interstate conflict; further securing control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.
Bulgaria	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; ensuring access to the Middle East; approaching the southwestern border of Russia.
Romania	2004	Access to the Black Sea coast; control of the strategic direction from Central Europe to the Danube Delta; border control to Ukraine; approaching the southwestern border of Russia.
Slovenia	2004	Securing a position in the northern Adriatic; control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube.
Albania	2009	Securing a position in the southern Adriatic (control of Otranto); control of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea (through the territory of Kosovo and/or North Macedonia to Bulgarian ports).
Croatia	2009	Securing a position in the central part of the Adriatic waters; control of strategic routes from the Pannonia Plain (Hungary) to the Adriatic Sea (most pass through the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina); control of the strategic direction along the Sava valley to the confluence with the Danube.
Montenegro	2017	Establishment of the Adriatic Troika by linking with Albania and Croatia, whereby NATO fully ensures the communication route from the Gulf of Trieste to the Peloponnese; control of the southern branch of the Belgrade - Bar traffic route.
North Macedonia	2020	Completion of control over the southern route of the strategic direction from the Adriatic to the Black Sea; Control of the "Balkan vertical" - a key regional traffic route (Athens - Thessaloniki - Skopje - Nis - Belgrade - Budapest) that stretches through the Moravian-Vardar valley.

What was missed in the Cold War period has been made up for in the post-Cold War era. After the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the US quickly established contacts with almost all Balkan countries, signed military agreements, and established its military bases. And all that under the umbrella of NATO integration. The Yugoslav crisis also served them well for that. NATO's participation during the Yugoslav civil war, or, to be more precise, NATO's participation in the Yugoslav civil war, was set in stages, from Croatia through Bosnia to Kosovo. After the signing of the Washington Agreement between Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović (with the mediation of the US and the personal involvement of Bill Clinton) in March 1994, the Croatian-Muslim conflict was politically ended and, in the military-operational sense "brought under control". Simply put, there was no longer a threat of continued hostilities that could threaten the new partnership between Zagreb and Sarajevo, which was reached with the support of Washington. That is why both Zagreb and Sarajevo are directed against Belgrade. Of course, with the support of Washington. Until then, Zagreb and Sarajevo could count on the political support of the US with occasional military actions that went in their favour, but in the spring of 1994, the door was opened for full military support from NATO. Normally, the US, as a key member of NATO, insisted on the multinational dimension and allied solidarity and initiated future operations to be carried out more under the auspices of NATO and less as unilateral activities of the US itself.

The first concrete results were already visible in August and September 1995. First, NATO participated in the Croatian military-police operation "Storm" from the planning stage to the immediate bombing of the positions of the forces of the Republic of Srpska Krajina (RSK): from surveying the terrain and the deployment of the RSK forces through the destruction of the radar centre near Knin to the bombing of the Udbina airport. Certainly, this is not a popular topic within NATO, so it was not frequently discussed. Portuguese General Carlos Martins Branco, then an official in the UN structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, explains: "Tuđman managed to do what the fascist Ustasha state NDH failed to do during the Second World War: to permanently expel the Serbian population from Krajina". This brutal ethnic cleansing leads us to reconsider the hypotheses of genocide, given the indiscriminate executions and the evidence of large-scale murders of defenceless civilians" (Branco 2021). Apparently, even the allies who

prepared “Oluja” and helped in its execution are not proud of what they have done. And how could they?

In September of the same year, NATO bombed the Republic of Srpska in an operation with the code name *Deliberate Force* (Owen 2000). Although two-thirds of the raids were carried out by US Air Force planes (2,318 out of a total of 3,515), the air forces of Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, the Netherlands, and Spain also participated directly in the operation. In fact, sporadic confrontations between NATO aviation and the anti-aircraft defence of the military forces of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Serbs occurred continuously from the beginning of 1994 (NATO 1995). Namely, in April 1993, according to the decision of the UN, NATO started *Operation Deny Flight* to ensure a no-fly zone over Bosnia and Herzegovina (UN SC 1993, 1-2). In February 1994, NATO aviation intercepted six planes of the Army of the Republic of Srpska, and four were shot down. On the other hand, in April 1994, Serbian forces shot down one French and one British plane each over Goražde, which bombed infantry positions of the Republic of Srpska Army, while in June 1995, an American F-16C plane was also shot down.

The bombing of Serbian positions was supposed to change the balance of forces on the ground, disable anti-aircraft defence, reduce military potential, and thus create a more favourable environment for the Croatian-Muslim side. Interestingly, it was only partially successful; i.e., the later Paris-Dayton Peace Agreement nevertheless created a two-entity structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the Republic of Srpska as one of the two entities. In practice, this meant a kind of (con)federalization of the country, even though the US intended to create multi-ethnic cantons with a strong central government in Sarajevo. The high point of NATO’s engagement was the events of 1998-1999, which included the preparation and execution of aggression against the FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), which represented direct assistance to the Albanians of Kosovo and Metohija to later unilaterally declare the so-called Republic of Kosovo (Krga 2022, 47-61). Acting without the approval of the UN Security Council, with a very problematic argument for the start of the air campaign (but also the preparation of the ground forces for the attack on the FR Yugoslavia, which did not happen anyway), since it turned out that there were no war crimes that served as a reason for the bombing, in violation of public international law, NATO actually got involved in the business of reshaping space and

violently changing existing borders. NATO used military forces directly without any hesitation to conduct operations that could have helped it fulfil strategic goals. Since the Serbian factor got in the way of achieving strategic goals, the projected image of the Serbs has continuously been unfavourable since 1994. With the support of Croatia, Operation Storm was carried out, which was the largest ethnic cleansing operation on the soil of Europe after the Second World War (ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population). Then airstrikes on the Army of the Republic of Srpska created a more favourable environment for the Croat-Muslim coalition in B&H (in the tactical, operational, and political sense), the separatism of the Kosovo-Metohija Albanians was finally supported by the aggression against the FR Yugoslavia, and the process of changing the borders of internationally recognised and sovereign states began. The last thing in the series shows that NATO's engagement in the Yugoslav civil war was primarily motivated by its strategic goals. If NATO's goal was to rely on UN regulations and respect the internationally recognised borders of the newly created states (that was the rationale for engagement in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, although that rationale can also be discussed, especially in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bearing in mind the fact that the referendum on "independence" held in 1992 failed because a qualified majority did not vote for it), then there would never be an operation against the FR Yugoslavia and the so-called "independent Kosovo" as a consequence. It was necessary to correct Eisenhower's mistake from the Second World War, to make up for what was missed, and to strengthen the positions of NATO from the Baltics to Anatolia in the new post-bipolar world, and, in that context, to support first the Croats and Bosnian Muslims, then Albanians, and leave the FR Yugoslavia outside of any legal order. The ending in Kosovo fits well with points 3 and 10 that Wimmer communicated to Schroeder: "The European legal order is an obstacle to the implementation of NATO's plans." In this sense, the American legal order is much more suitable for application in Europe as well. And in this connection: "In every process, the right of people to self-determination should be given priority over all other provisions or rules of international law". NATO shaped and established a new legal order in Europe, and then, in international relations, the rules defined during the Cold War were no longer valid. The Balkans served as a test field for determining the new function of NATO, and the civil war in Yugoslavia

served as a means to gather experience and show others how they would end up if non-cooperative.

Expansion of NATO to the Balkans

NATO's interest in the Balkans as an important geographical area caused the presence of this military alliance in the breakup of Yugoslavia. Involvement in the breakup of Yugoslavia was not a goal in itself; it was for the new states that emerged from that breakup to be incorporated into NATO. In the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO was more focused on the Baltic and Central European regions. Candidates for admission were Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, which joined NATO in 1999. Balkan states – Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia (although Romania and especially Slovenia often emphasise that they do not belong to the Balkan space) – joined NATO during the so-called “fifth enlargement” in 2004 (together with Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Slovakia). There was a special framework “2+2” for the gradual admission of Bulgaria and Romania, during which Turkey and Greece as “old members” supported this process (Karaosmanoglu 1999, 213–224).

However, despite the fact that the process of NATO expansion did not start with the Balkan states, after 2004, it turned into a purely “Balkan thing”. Since then, NATO has expanded only and exclusively in the Balkan Peninsula and not anywhere else until 2022 (Proroković 2023b, 53). Then, after the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, the decision was made to extend invitations to Sweden and Finland (Wall & Monaghan and Morcos 2022). Croatia and Albania became new members in the sixth enlargement in 2009, Montenegro in the seventh in 2017, and North Macedonia in the eighth enlargement in 2020. Only Serbia and B&H remained outside of NATO. Nevertheless, NATO is an important security factor in these two countries as well. This is not only because of the fact that both Serbia and B&H are surrounded by NATO states. Regarding Serbia, NATO forces are deployed within the KFOR Mission and the International Military Presence in Kosovo and Metohija. Annex XI, *Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement*, of the so-called Ahtisaari's Plan, explains the position of the International Military Presence that was under NATO's responsibility. This plan in February 2008 became the basis for the unilateral declaration of

“independence” and an integral part of the “Constitution of Kosovo”. Thus, Article 1.8 specifies that “The International Military Presence will work under the authority and political control of the North Atlantic Council and the NATO command”, and Article 2.1 clarifies that “the Chief of the International Military Presence is the supreme authority regarding the interpretation of the aspects of the Comprehensive Proposal concerning the International military presence”. Since the head of the International Military Presence is under the authority and political control of NATO, it can be concluded that the International military forces in Kosovo should “fulfil their responsibilities, including the use of necessary force” (Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement 2007, Article 2, Paragraph 2.2a); they have “the right to free movement throughout Kosovo in every aspect” (Ibidem, Paragraph 2.2b); they can “reinstate immediate and full military control over the air space” (Ibidem, Paragraph 2.2c); they can “undertake inspection activities in accordance with established goals and tasks” (Ibidem, Paragraph 2.2d); and they have right to “undertake actions to support the fulfilment of their own mandate that is consistent with the Comprehensive Proposal” (Ibidem, Paragraph 2.2e).

Given all the above mentioned and in line with Article 2.3, institutions and organs of Kosovo have to guarantee to the International Military Presence the “status, privileges, and immunity rights” that were before given only to the KFOR members. Having all this in mind, NATO is completely excluded from any civil, institutional, or political control in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. According to the established legal order within the “supervised independence” which is defined in the Comprehensive Proposal, the highest possible form of influence on NATO structures, either by the International Civilian Presence or by the institutions in Pristina, are “consultations” and “coordination”, and the head of the International Military Presence does not even have a formal obligation to submit a report on his work to any civilian official (Ibidem, Anex XI, Article 1, Paragraph 1.4).

The responsibilities of the international civilian representative are defined in such a way that everything related to the functioning of the International Military Presence is excluded from them, so the representatives of the international civilian mission do not even have the formal right to ask questions that encroach on the scope of work of the military structures in

Kosovo. A member of the negotiation team of the Republic of Serbia during “negotiations on the future status of Kosovo”, between Belgrade and Pristina in the 2006-2007 period and a former judge of the Constitutional Court of the FR Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Simić, in his analysis of the Comprehensive Proposal, states that “NATO itself does not allow any kind of control by the international civilian authority, even if it were European and certainly not one from Kosovo”. He concludes that “historically, until now, states created military alliances, and that is how NATO was formed, but careful analysis of Ahtisaari’s proposal, and especially provisions of Annex XI, opens the question of whether the world is for the first time faced with the effort of one military alliance to create its own state in which civilian structures would not limit their military power” (Simić 2007, 14-15). Essentially, NATO is a sovereign master in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, and not only in a military-political sense but partially in a legal and formal sense.

Regarding B&H, there is also not only a military-political but also a legally-formal dimension to the NATO presence. In Annex I-A of the Paris-Dayton Peace Agreement entitled “Agreement on Military Aspects of the Peace Settlement”, in points B and C, it is explicitly said: (B) “It is understood and agreed that NATO may establish such a force, which will operate under the authority and subject to the direction and political control of the North Atlantic Council (“NAC”) through the NATO chain of command. They undertake to facilitate its operations. The Parties, therefore, hereby agree and freely undertake to fully comply with all obligations set forth in this Annex. (C) It is understood and agreed that other States may assist in implementing the military aspects of this Annex. The Parties understand and agree that the modalities of those States’ participation will be the subject of agreement between such participating States and NATO” (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1995, 5).

During the implementation of the “Dayton Rules”, NATO has decreased its presence in B&H, and in accordance with that, international military missions have changed their names, mission goals, and number of personnel. After UNPROFOR, IFOR was formed, then SFOR, and it was succeeded by EUFOR Althea (The European Union Force in B&H 2003) in 2004. Although this operation is presented as the European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, things are somewhat different from the formal

and legal sides. For this mission, the European Union Military Staff is using NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) as the EU's Operational Headquarters (OHQ) and is working through the Deputy to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, a European officer.

Therefore, Serbia and B&H are not in NATO, but NATO is present in part of the territory of Serbia and in B&H. It should also be remembered that B&H's entry into NATO was blocked by one entity: the Republic of Srpska. The mood in the other Croat-Muslim entity is completely different.

NATO has become a key factor in the regional security of the Balkans, regardless of the fact that two Balkan countries are still not members of the Alliance. (Proroković 2023a, 294-295)

Consequences and Perspectives of NATO Activities in the Balkans

However, despite the fact that NATO has undoubtedly become a key factor in regional security in the Balkans, thus correcting Eisenhower's mistake, it cannot be claimed that NATO can implement its intentions without any problems. Despite everything, as already mentioned, the two Balkan countries are not members of NATO. Among other things, it is the result of NATO's actions during the Yugoslav civil war and the extreme deployment against Serbia and the Serbs. Observing public opinion surveys in Serbia, in which it can be seen that for more than a decade and a half, more than 80% of respondents are against joining NATO, it becomes clear that this trend will continue. This mood cannot be changed overnight, nor is there a government that will make decisions against the will of more than 80% of the population (Nova srpska politika misao 2022). Perhaps an even bigger problem for NATO is in B&H, where even a quarter of a century after the signing of the Peace Agreement, there are almost daily political battles about the (in)functionality of the Dayton system, the vital interests of the three nations, and the constitutional competences of the two entities.

In all those struggles, NATO sided either with the Croat-Muslim coalition, with the Croats, or on some occasions with the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims, but never and nowhere with the Serbs. In the Serbian corps in B&H, NATO is perceived as a participant in daily political upheavals aimed at derogating the positions of the Serbs in B&H and the

Republic of Srpska as an entity, and not only as a participant in the war that ended in 1995 (Kecmanović 2007).

Bearing in mind the geographical position of Serbia, the elements of soft power and cultural politics, thanks to which it maintains its influence in the immediate environment despite everything that has happened since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the strength of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as the geographical distribution of the Serbian population (which, despite ethnic cleansing, persecutions, and pressures in certain countries, inhabits all the former Yugoslav republics in smaller or larger numbers), this is a problem for the legitimacy of NATO in the region. Somewhere this problematization of NATO's legitimacy is expressed more (for example, in Montenegro), somewhere less so (for example, in North Macedonia), but its existence is evident. The case of Montenegro is special in all respects since it can turn into a NATO "nightmare". Namely, the entire process of Montenegro's independence from Serbia was connected with NATO's ambition to continue the fragmentation of the Balkan space and the further "drawing in" of new members. At the 2006 referendum, which was full of irregularities, the "establishing of independence" was voted with a "slight majority" (the qualified majority for the decision was 55%, but for dissolution of the State Union voted 55.49%). The result is that Montenegrin society remains permanently polarised. In a polarised society in which the overwhelming majority was against joining NATO, a referendum was not allowed, and the decision to join the Alliance was made by a simple majority vote in Parliament. That simple majority was scrapped again in the parliamentary elections, which were also full of irregularities, but no one in the western part of the world looked back on it since the elections had a very clear purpose.

At the same time, recognising that the "Serbian factor" is the most important in hindering the Euro-Atlantic integrations (where special attention is paid to the actions of the Serbian Orthodox Church), in agreement with Milo Đukanović, the stabilocrat who governed Montenegro for three decades (either as president or as a prime minister), Western structures are investing in the project of building a hybrid Montenegrin nation that will be based on an extreme anti-Serbian discourse (Raković 2019). This has ultimately led to the downfall of Milo Đukanović, the collapse of the entire project, and the entry of Montenegro into a fierce institutional and political

crisis that has been ongoing since 2020. There is no doubt that the decision to join NATO lacks legitimacy, as well as that NATO itself encouraged operations inside Montenegro (building a hybrid nation) or operations related to its foreign and security policy (shameful recognition of the so-called Republic of Kosovo in October 2008), with which the overwhelming majority of citizens of this country do not agree. How, then, can Montenegro remain in NATO? The answer is simple: it will be forced to do so. Montenegro does not have sufficient power potential – military, economic, or political – to lead an independent policy. Joining NATO has so far been a one-way street, even for bigger and more powerful players in international relations than Montenegro. Therefore, Montenegro cannot be the first country to withdraw from NATO. However, the situation is completely schizophrenic, and it must continuously produce political consequences and tensions and destabilise the country as long as NATO exists.

In somewhat different form and at a lower intensity, similar phenomena can be seen in North Macedonia. “At the same time, in order to strengthen the position of Albanians in the Balkans, Washington is actively lobbying for Albania’s accession to NATO. However, this puts in a completely new context the pronounced separatist aspirations of the Macedonian Albanians. In order to prevent the “Bosnian” or “Kosovo” scenario in Macedonia, American foreign policy starts to be oriented towards “drawing” this country into NATO. Thus, NATO becomes the only guarantor of maintaining territorial integrity. However, “drawing into” NATO could not be done easily because Greece was blocking it and demanding that this former Yugoslav republic change its name. Finally, a solution was found by changing the name of the state to the Republic of North Macedonia. But, as in the case of Montenegro, there is no support from citizens for that step. North Macedonia is emerging as a solution due to NATO expansion. Instead of this being the solution, two new problems have automatically arisen. First, Macedonian society remained polarised, and interethnic tensions between Slavic Macedonians and Albanians became more pronounced (Albanians supported the name change 100% in the referendum because that undermines Macedonian identity). Secondly, since this “blackmailing policy” has brought results to Greece in its treatment of (North) Macedonia, Bulgaria has started applying the same method. Sofia is blocking the continuation of negotiations between North Macedonia and the EU until the identity issues are resolved (including the issue of the name of the

language, which Sofia claims is only a dialect of Bulgarian!). Bulgaria's aggressive policy towards North Macedonia, led by the defence minister Krasimir Karakachanov, has provoked reactions from Greece and Serbia, which see it as a revival of old plans for the country's "horizontal division" between Sofia and Tirana. In this way, Greece is getting involved in this crisis again" (Prorokovich 2022, 9–10).

Probably the biggest challenge for NATO in the Balkans is Kosovo! First, this is an example where all the rules established in the bipolar Cold War order were violated. Therefore, it was a reflection of the American unipolar world, in which NATO was supposed to serve as a military instrument for the establishment of a new order. With the departure of the American unipolar world into history, is NATO also leaving? At the moment, there is no clear answer to that question, but such an outcome cannot be ruled out. How bad the NATO approach is, related to the change of Cold War principles on the inviolability of borders, was shown during the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis. While at the same time criticising Russia for organising a referendum in Crimea (2014) or later in the southeast of Ukraine (2022), NATO strategists not only unquestioningly supported the "independence of Kosovo" but also exerted active pressure on Serbia to agree to it. Simply put, the mistake NATO made in Kosovo is disproportionate to the importance of Kosovo for NATO. Over time, NATO's position in Kosovo became no longer part of the solution but part of the problem.

Second, the breakup of Yugoslavia was eventually formalised according to the so-called "Badinter rules". The former borders of socialist republics became the new borders of independent states. Kosovo and Metohija, or, in the earlier stages of communist Yugoslavia, Kosovo, was only an Autonomous Province within Serbia. Kosovo did not have the right to self-determination, regardless of the fact that at the meeting in Bratislava in 2000, point 10 stated that such intentions must be supported. Because of that, now that everything else is open, the borders of all the former Yugoslav republics are called into question. If something does not always apply to everything and everyone, then it is not a rule. The Badinter's principles simply do not apply since February 2008 (Proroković 2020, 281–298). NATO expected that by putting pressure on Serbia, Belgrade would agree to its wrongdoing, thus putting an end to this procedure. But that expectation was naive. The open

and aggressive violation of Badinter's principles put into question the future of B&H and North Macedonia in the first place, but possibly of other Balkan actors as well.

Third, NATO tried to expand its influence by fragmenting space, creating new dependent state-like creations that were not capable of defending themselves. On the one hand, in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, it brought them the correction of Eisenhower's mistake, the deployment of troops, and the firm political control of the entire area. However, at the same time, it brought them the creation of odium against NATO not only in Serbia but also in the entire Serbian ethnos space. The legitimacy of NATO has been called into question, and this is again a much bigger issue than the importance of the expansion of NATO to the Balkan states during the previous years.

On the other hand, dependent state-like creations have become classic clients of the West, and in that context, NATO. These countries are completely dependent – militarily, politically, and economically – on the will of others. In a historical period when a new “strategic line” had to be projected from the Baltic to Anatolia, when we lived with Francis Fukuyama's laconic statement about the “end of history” and with the conviction that unipolarity would last forever, the prevailing opinion was that from the constant expansion NATO and the EU could make good money (new markets with new consumers for American and Western European companies, new natural resources for exploitation, new labour cheaper than in the West, etc.), even if that territory would have to expand to small Balkan States (Fukuyama 1992). However, with the great economic crisis, the pandemic and its consequences, and ultimately the dramatic rise in the prices of energy and fuel, it turned out that these state-like creations are increasingly turning into “dependent territories”, entities that must be subsidised. That is why these clients have increasingly started to represent a cost for the West and, in that context, for NATO. Kosovo, although not a country in the full sense of the word, has become an illustrative example to describe this process. No matter which way you look at it or analyse the situation in relation to Kosovo and Metohija, for NATO, it is just an expense that can no longer be justified.

NATO did become a key factor in regional stability in the Balkans, but in order to reach that point, it had to pay a very high price. Eisenhower's

mistake, looking at things on the ground from NATO's point of view, has been corrected. However, looking at political matters from the point of view of the Balkan peoples, it remains unclear to what extent and with what consequences. It seems that NATO no longer has at its disposal instruments with which it could strengthen its position, and it is extremely uncertain how the weakening of its position can manifest itself in political reality and regional security. Given that NATO is having issues with legitimacy, a lack of public support, double standards, violations of laws and values that NATO itself endorses, and an increase in expenses that is steadily rising, it is apparent that the Alliance's position is deteriorating.

Conclusion: The Balkans with NATO and after NATO

Although at first glance it seems that NATO, as a key factor in regional security, has ensured its long-term influence in the Balkans, this can also lead to the wrong conclusion. NATO's interest in stationing its forces in the Balkans and then bringing all the Balkan states into membership has existed for a long time. This interest was realised by the direct involvement of NATO in the civil war in Yugoslavia, which took place gradually but also ended with a drastic and dramatic measure: the aggression against the FR Yugoslavia. Despite the fact that the NATO forces (as expected) won, by all accounts, an unequal war with the Yugoslav army and Serbian police, the consequences of this act remained and are very difficult to correct. Actually, they may turn out to be impossible to correct. On the one hand, by joining the war and, finally, through aggression, NATO managed to assert itself at the beginning of the 21st century as not only a key but, in political practice, the only factor in regional security. What NATO says is how it is done. State leaders could offer resistance and influence the partial adoption of their own amendments, but this could not change NATO's set strategic goals. On the other hand, NATO has become a victim of its own politics. First of all, the circumstances in the international environment, and therefore also in the security environment, have changed. Two decades after the NATO aggression against the FR Yugoslavia, an event that was supposed to represent the pinnacle of American preemptive action in Europe and send a message to everyone else that either they would be obedient or they would be bombed, almost nothing was the same in world politics. It was not the same in the Balkans, either. Taking advantage of the mistakes of NATO and

the EU, Russia and China returned to the game as increasingly important regional security actors. Russia, with strong support for the respect of international law in B&H and Kosovo, did not allow the Dayton structure to be changed or the disempowerment of the Republic of Srpska, just as it did not allow the circumvention of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) or the gross violation of Serbia's territorial integrity. China, through investments during the implementation of the Belt and Road megaproject, managed to fill all the holes left behind by the EU, which purposefully avoided improving certain sectors in the economies of the Balkan countries. By 2020, thanks to previous acquisitions and expansion into the Balkans, NATO remained a key factor in regional security, but it was no longer the only one in Balkan political practice. In addition, the problem for NATO is the lack of legitimacy, since the expansion process was not carried out by democratic methods, and during the race to achieve certain goals, all kinds of politicians and all kinds of policies were supported. Then, there is the open question of what will happen in the Balkans with the weakening of NATO, its withdrawal, or its potential disintegration. The existing regional construction was built in accordance with American interests at certain historical moments. For some, it meant reaching historical results and fulfilling historical justice, and for others, it meant falling into historical catastrophe and injustice.

The potential to require a review of certain processes induced or supported by NATO is already on the table. This primarily refers to Kosovo and the decision to unilaterally declare "independence" in February 2008. How can NATO prevent this? How can it even answer that? Is NATO ready to defend its projects in the Balkans with force? What price is it willing to pay for the maintenance of client states that have become completely dependent on it? What is the strategic importance of the Balkans in the new geographical redistribution of the world and the shaping of a multipolar order?

The thesis of a strategic line from the Baltic to Anatolia remains just a dream, difficult to achieve, and, in the current circumstances, too expensive. At the same time, by starting the offensive in Ukraine, Russia (with the open or tacit support of the main non-Western actors) accelerates the transformation of the world political system and initiates the adoption of new rules of the game by which world politics will function. In such circumstances, the prospects for NATO action in the Balkans are not bright.

If the strategy of total opposition to Russia continues, NATO can assign the role of a new military base to the Balkans as an integral part of the Eastern European battlefield against Russia. NATO could organise continual pressures and provocations towards the Russian interest zone from the Balkans, which would manifest in different ways. There are three problems with this approach.

First, falling into the status of a military base in the long term leaves the already economically and socially vulnerable Balkans in a phase of “incompleteness”. Lagging behind Western European countries will become more pronounced. Who will invest in the military base? How would economic and social activities be organised in conditions of permanent insecurity? The Ukrainization of the Balkans, according to the matrix seen during the past eight years, is the only thing that can be offered. There will be money, of course, for arming against the Russians, building military infrastructure, spreading propaganda, and raising Russophobia. For the rest, there will not be any money. If we also take into account the rise in prices of energy and food products, inflation, and the expected decline in living standards on a continental scale, the picture becomes even more bleak.

Second, it is under question how capable and ready NATO and the EU are to organise the East European battlefield, and especially the Balkan battlefield. A debacle in Afghanistan, failures on the “Russian border” and in the Middle East, along with the essential show of weakness in Ukraine, where there was readiness to fight against Russia to the last Ukrainian but not seriously help Ukraine when the war broke out, are not great recommendations. The complexity of relations in the Balkan regional (sub)complex should also be taken into account; the circumstances are significantly different from the situation in the Baltic. NATO and the EU could not implement the planned de-Daytonization of B&H and force Serbia to accept the Albanian separatist creation; they could not even push through the looting of church property in Montenegro, and now they will mobilise all the Balkan nations for an exhausting “hybrid war” against Russia! Impositions, threats, and intimidation can no longer help in this case either. This could only lead to the collapse of the state “systems” accustomed to a clientelist relationship that implied little work and more obedience.

Third, it is extremely naive to expect that there will be no Russian countermeasures. According to some elements, the conditions in the Balkans

are even more favourable than in Ukraine for the expansion of Russian activities in several directions! Falling under the status of a military base means that the conflict or escalation between two sides will take place in that geographical area. It cannot be expected that only one side will use that geographical area to transfer its own activities to the foreign territories of the enemy. This can destabilise the region to the limit, deepen inter-ethnic and inter-state tensions, and also weaken public trust in state leadership. Chaotization, therefore, becomes complete and comprehensive.

Therefore, the stabilisation of the Balkans, both in the near term and in the long term, must be thought of in a different way. Falling into the status of a military camp must be avoided. With the addition that this status would last for a long, long time and that the final outcome is impossible to predict. Certainly, at this moment, it seems naive or utopian to discuss some new form of Balkan confederation, Balkan union, or Balkan alliance. It is neither in the interest of NATO or the EU, nor is there a critical mass within the "system" of the Balkan countries to realise such a project. It will not even be in Russia's interest if the orchestrated joining of most of the Balkan countries to anti-Russian hysterical measures continues. But, at the same time, it is irresponsible and disturbing not to think about alternatives and to silently observe the epochal changes taking place. If there are no alternatives, if there is no reaction to the changes, the Balkan people and the Balkan states will become mere objects of geopolitics, not subjects that will be able to influence their own destiny even to a limited extent. A sustainable solution can be sought in a new way of connecting beyond the foreseen "bloc division", with security guarantees from both Western actors and Russia, while also projecting the special roles of Turkey and China and patiently solving internal and regional open issues in a completely new framework. Where there are no solutions, postpone them until further notice and take intermediate steps to reduce the potential for conflict. With such an approach, a matrix for wider integration in Southeast Europe could be built, which would include Turkey and Ukraine after the end of the war.

Despite the fact that this attitude seems naive and utopian, it should be remembered that after wars, there are always negotiations. After an armed conflict, some negotiate from the position of the winner, some from the position of the loser, and agreements are made accordingly. The current armed conflict will not end as planned in the West. The escalation in Ukraine

is contrary to all their strategic plans. With NATO, the Balkans is not becoming any more stable or secure, nor will it have a more certain perspective. The Balkan issue, for sure, does not have the capacity to “tear down” NATO. However, the Balkan issue has the capacity to help breakdown NATO, and when it comes to breaking down the credibility of this military alliance or its decomposition, one of the ways is by showing which mistakes that it made in its approach have caused significant consequences for NATO itself and for regional security as well.

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